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MY HOLIDAY.

IN THREE CHAPTERS.—CHAPTER I.

AN amusing peculiarity in the office which I have the honour to hold, is the obligation of being a member of so many public bodies, that I would frequently have to give my presence at five or six places at precisely the same hour—a thing not easily done, even with the aid of a carriage and pair of horses. In circumstances of this perplexing nature, it is necessary in some degree to compound with conscience—sometimes preferring one Board, and sometimes another, with perhaps a kind of leaning to some one in particular. In occupying the critical position here referred to, if I have had any preference at all, it has been for the Commission of Northern Lights, a body invested with the duty of managing all the light-houses on the sea-coast of Scotland and Isle of Man, now amounting to nearly sixty in number (to say nothing of buoys and beacons), and involving an expenditure of eight-and-twenty thousand pounds per annum.

This Northern Commission may be accepted as a fair specimen of that little understood state of affairs in which many people, for the honour of the thing, give their time and trouble for nothing—certainly nothing in the way of cash. A story is told of Joseph Hume having, in his virtuous indignation in parliament, described the Commission of northern luminaries as being a regular and costly job, when he was set right by the Lord Advocate of the day, who stated that the whole remuneration derived by the Commissioners for their trouble consisted in a dinner once a year—whereupon Joseph, in a state of munificent repentance, declared that they should in future have two dinners instead of one! These two dinners are now, accordingly, a settled institution in Edinburgh, the head-quarters of the Commission; and, from experience, I am able to confess that the institution is conducted in no niggard fashion. Supposing the story to be correct, the Lord Advocate might have added in explanation, that a dozen or so of the Commissioners are indulged with an excursion, free of expense,

annually in the *Pharos*, a powerful and commodious paddle-steamer belonging to the Board, which is employed in carrying stores to, and in making periodical inspections of, the several light-houses.

Who is to go in the *Pharos* is sometimes a matter of delicate consideration. The Commissioners consist of certain crown-officers, and sheriffs of maritime counties, along with some provosts and bailies; and at a meeting for the purpose, the selection is properly adjusted, not a little depending on the wish of the parties, for what some may consider to be a privilege, others view as a positively irksome or impracticable duty. In the present year, I was honoured by being named one of the excursionists; and not disinclined to a little airy variety in the routine of public business, I ventured on giving my assent. The only real pinch was how to get away. The *Pharos* was to depart for its voyage on the west coast on the 23d of July, but owing to certain matters of pressing public concern, I could not leave for some days later; by these means, I lost the Clyde, Galloway, and Isle of Man part of the excursion, and had to be taken up in the harbour of Belfast, where the *Pharos* was appointed to lie tranquilly during Sunday the 29th.

Apropos of the Isle of Man—what has it to do with the Northern Commission? Thereby hangs a tale. Light-houses, as is very reasonable, are supported from the proceeds of statutory dues payable by the ships which are presumed to benefit by them—outgoing foreign vessels paying the dues on starting, and vessels entering port paying on arrival—the whole managed in a neat way by the officers of customs. In old times—say fifty years ago—the Isle of Man had its own system of lights, which were so bad as to be complained of by the Liverpool traders; and it became obvious that these lights should pass under the authority of one of the three Boards of the United Kingdom—the Trinity House of England, the Ballast Board of Ireland, or the Northern Lights of Scotland. The method adopted for settling the question was exceedingly rational; it was to ask what each Board would take to light the Isle of Man,

and adopt that which was cheapest. The Trinity offered to maintain the lights for twopence per ton on all vessels that passed; while the Northern Commission declared its readiness to accept the very small sum of a farthing per ton. This was in 1821, since which time the Isle of Man, in the matter of light-houses, has been connected with Scotland. The farthing per ton was a shrewd conception. So large is the number of vessels passing the Isle of Man, that this forms the best-paying branch of revenue of the Northern Lights.

Not having seen Belfast for twenty years, I was not prepared for its vast extension and numerous street improvements, or for learning that the annual income of its harbour has risen, since 1848, from £23,000 to £52,000—looking to which notable circumstances, one is inclined to feel somewhat incredulous on the score of alleged Irish poverty. Belfast, at all events, possesses one unmistakable evidence of social advancement—a foetid river and harbour; so loathsome and insalubrious were its waters, that the *Pharos* could not make out the entire Sunday at its handsome quay; and, receiving me on board, dropped down for the night to the open sea adjoining Carrickfergus.

Skirting along the north of Ireland, and then shooting across to the southern points of the Hebrides, I enjoyed my first day at sea. In passing, we took a look of the Giants' Causeway, which all on board pronounced to be a poor affair in comparison to Staffa. At the Rhins of Islay began that systematic visitation of Scottish light-houses which was pursued for the next fourteen days, among the outer and inner islands, and along the coast of the mainland as far as Cape Wrath; from which limit the vessel retraced its course southwards to Oban, leaving the east coast, and Orkney and Shetland Islands, for next season.

With the drawback of generally dull and moist weather, suggestive of an improvement of Scott's well-known lines:

O Caledonia! stern and wild,
Wet-nurse for a poetic child—

and occasionally tossed about in a rather uncere monious way, life glided on pleasantly in the *Pharos*; there being in it that nice blending of duty with amusement, good living, and leisurely converse, which constitutes an enviable mode of existence—at anyrate, I do not know of anything better in this world of ours. Five sheriffs, the provost of Inverness, the senior bailie of Glasgow, the secretary, and myself, made up the party—a joyous set of mortals, who, with one or two exceptions, scorned to be sea-sick, in nearly all weathers played at shovel-board on deck, and quite as regularly made their appearance at meals as they took to the boat to visit the several light-houses.

It is customary in these excursions by the *Pharos*, for one to be chosen 'commodore,' who has the high function of presiding at table, regulating the routes as well as general procedure, and of deciding what shall be the daily bill of fare—in which last capacity he has frequent serious communings

with the cook. Our commodore on this occasion was the Sheriff of Forfarshire, who happily tempered power with discretion, kept all in good-humour, and deservedly received a vote of thanks for his services, not the least of which consisted in keeping a capital cuisine. Breakfast at 9 (a Scotch breakfast), lunch at 1, dinner at 6 (full dress), tea at 8, and anything you like at 9; all in bed by a little after 10. Such was the usual routine in the alimentary department—any modification in the fare, considering the amount of fresh air and hard work encountered, being quite out of the question. It added not a little to the comfort of the party, that the ship anchored in a quiet bay every evening about dinner-time—that, in my opinion, contributing materially to digestion—and did not start on a fresh cruise till 7 next morning, which allowed a walk of a couple of hours on deck, to promote a relish for the kipper, the fresh herrings, and the other edibles which at 9 garnished the table of the saloon.

I have never lived for a time on board any vessel so entirely satisfactory as the *Pharos*. With the exact discipline, promptitude, and courtesy observable in war-ships, it offered the comforts of a well-regulated home—the alimentary arrangements above hinted at; a library, if you wished to indulge in reading; and a snug little room on deck, provided with telescopes, charts, and maps, where one might lounge at ease, and be ready to turn out in a moment with field-glass in hand, to scrutinise the wildly picturesque shores of the Hebridean Archipelago.

There was always some little bustle and fun, along with a becoming air of business, on landing. The stoppage and anchoring of the vessel about a quarter of a mile from the shore, the lowering of a boat, into which the party trooped in walking trim, and the serving out of capacious and well-kept sea-cloaks, as a shelter from the spray while darting over the waves, formed the ordinary routine of disembarkation. One thing was never missed—the landing of 'Milo.' All who have sailed in the *Pharos* have made the acquaintance of Milo, a middle-aged, brown water-spaniel, somewhat lazy from not having much to do, but solemn in character, and to all appearance, impressed with the conviction that he is an essential member of the crew. Milo always makes a point of going on shore with the Commissioners, in order to have a ramble about, while they are engaged in their grave official investigations. When the landing is at a precipitous quay, up which you have to climb by a fixed iron ladder, poor Milo is somewhat nonplussed; but the difficulty is got over by his being placed on the back of one of the sailors, whom he grasps round the neck with his forepaws, carried in which fashion up the steep ladder, he is set down in safety; and by the same pleasant process of locomotion, he returns to the boat, after enjoying his scamper over the scanty herbage which clothes the rocky promontories.

In these landings, there was considerable uniformity. For the most part, the light-houses are

place from the not o ing a for the veni the e these of ou of the regul the s upper place the t burn haps the f betw the c with wor ship out giga to t tena L conc from in t not the duti with wor ref for lam full acc out dim to c way hap and cer Con ject and app spi on lig sho ma tis me tio ba loc ris lig cie Th al ad of de

placed on bold headlands, at a distance varying from a hundred yards to a mile and a half from the landing-place. Each establishment consists not only of a tall stone tower, with its lofty lighting apparatus, but of a cluster of neat dwellings for the keepers, to which, in all cases, there is convenient access from the shore by a road made at the expense of the Commission. The making of these roads forms, in some instances, a heavy item of outlay, but is indispensable for the construction of the works, and afterwards for facilitating the regular and safe transmission of stores. Reaching the spot, and throwing aside walking-sticks and loose upper-coats, the Commissioners mount in the first place by winding stairs and ladders to the summit of the tower; there they sagaciously examine the bright burnished lamps, lenses, and reflectors—some, perhaps, by dint of repeated investigation, acquiring for the first time an intelligent idea of the difference between the two great modern systems of lighting—the catoptric and dioptric. All, at least, are struck with the singular beauty and ingenuity of the works, and of their great value as regards averting shipwreck and the saving of human life. Noble outposts of humanity and civilisation are these gigantic structures! Would not any one be proud to take part in their organisation and maintenance?

Large lenses and prisms of different shapes for concentrating and sending forth the rays of light from effulgent oil-lamps, constitute a leading feature in the apparatus. Formerly, Great Britain could not produce these lenses in perfection, owing to the obstruction to experiment caused by the glass-duties, and our light-houses were therefore supplied with the needful apparatus by France. Now, the works are of home-manufacture, glass, lamps, reflectors, and everything—Chance of Birmingham for lenses, and Milne of Edinburgh for brass and lamp-work, being the main producers; the cost of a fully-equipped apparatus is from £800 to £3000, according to the class and character of the light. The outlay in building a light-house varies, according to dimensions and other circumstances, from £4500 to six times that amount; but sometimes the cost is considerably higher. Something, I learn, in the way of sufficiency, depends on the spirit which happens to influence the Trinity House of England and Board of Trade, which, by statute, exercise a certain control over the operations of the Northern Commission—the Trinity as regards sites and projects, the Board of Trade as regards plans, revenue, and expenditure. It was not always so; and some appear to think that under the new régime the spirit of economy has weighed a little too heavily on the construction and general character of the light-houses lately erected on the dangerous sea-shores of Scotland. A pretty bold attempt was made about sixteen years ago to abolish the Scottish and Irish Boards, and concentrate the entire management in the Trinity House. A recommendation to this effect came, as I think, with a peculiarly bad grace from the Royal Commission employed to look into these affairs; for in drawing a comparison, it had to acknowledge that the 'Scotch light-houses are in the best state of general efficiency, the English next, and the Irish third.' The Northern Commission was accordingly let alone, and continues as effective as ever, under the administration of a vigilant secretary and the body of unpaid officials, who seem to take a surprising degree of interest in its operations. Something of

its success is doubtless also due to the Stevensons, a well-known family of engineers, who have done great things for Scottish and colonial light-houses. The late Robert Stevenson, the father, was the eminent constructor of the light-house on the Bell-Rock, and for the Skerryvore we are indebted to his elder son, Alan, recently deceased.

Were I giving a formal history of light-houses, I should specify a number of things which characterise the Scotch establishments, and have led to the foregoing testimony of their marked superiority. I will refer only to what no one can avoid noticing—the respectable appearance of the keepers and their families, the large number of children, the neatness and substantiality of the dwellings, and the air of comfort which universally prevails. One would almost think that a blessing was showered upon the fraternity, in compensation for the exile which all less or more necessarily experience. But it is to be kept in mind that the 'service' is somewhat enviable, and commands a superior class of officers. To the excellent pay of from fifty to seventy guineas a year, are added a uniform, a free house, coal and candle, a garden, and a cow's grass if it can be obtained, books and periodicals—changed about for mutual convenience—medical attendance, and lastly, the visits of a missionary.

When the keepers have to do duty in those light-houses which stand on isolated rocks in the ocean, and must for weeks be absent from their homes, they are, over and above all these various advantages, provided with rations. The Board also furnishes the houses of the keepers in every particular, and by means of regular inspectors, preserves the whole in good order. It could not well be otherwise. Like soldiers on duty, keepers are moved about from place to place, according to promotion in the service, health, wish for change, and other causes; and when ordered off to some new scene, the family has only to carry away its personal luggage, with perhaps a few fancy articles, such as a favourite canary in a well-wrapped-up cage, a geranium in flower, or a stuffed solan goose, prized as a chimney-piece ornament. Quitting one home, it may be in a wild islet of Shetland, and reaching another possibly on the more genial shores of Mull, the wanderers find it a facsimile of that which they have left—the very eight-day clock, in its burnished mahogany case, that confronts them as they enter the new mansion, presenting, as it were, the face of a well-known friend, and in familiar sounds ticking an accustomed welcome.

Social economists speculate on plans for making life-assurance a matter of compulsion. This is done by the Northern Lights in a way worth describing. From the annual salary of each man who enters the service, the sum of £3 is deducted, and laid out in insuring his life. The insurance is taken in the name of the Commissioners, who, on the decease of the assured, draw and pay the amount to his family. According to the age at commencement, the sum ultimately realised ranges from £100 to £130, and comes as an acceptable boon to the bereaved widow and children. The good effected by this arrangement is incalculable. There are likewise retiring allowances for superannuated and well-behaved officers.

Comparative seclusion, remoteness from friends, at most only one or two neighbours with whom to hold rational converse: Are not these terrible drawbacks on the current sources of happiness of these light-house keepers? Not at all. Instances

are not unknown of individuals sinking under the quietude and sameness of their mode of life; but these are exceptions. As a general rule, the keepers and their families are a happy set of people, well read as to what is going on in the world, and accustomed to make the best of opportunities for bettering their circumstances. The periodical visits of inspectors, and of the *Pharos* or some other vessel with stores, are events of moment. But the greatest event of all during the year is the arrival of the Commissioners, when the flag is hoisted in their honour, and requests are entered in the note-book of the secretary. Some keepers solace their spare hours with handicrafts. One is a good tinsmith; another amuses himself with a turning-lathe and carpenter's bench; and I heard of a third who is noted among the islands as an excellent bootmaker. Setting aside all such useful recreations to fill up the time, let us again remember that these light-house keepers belong to a class of society who value the importance of an assured income, along with the other substantial benefits and social elevation of the service, above mere sentiment. Neither man nor woman whom I talked to complained of loneliness. No; it was not there that the shoe pinched. Revealing, as I thought, a fine trait in the Scottish character, that which only and really detracted from the happiness of the situation, was the difficulty—often the entire impracticability—of getting proper schooling for the children. 'I have not been at church for four years, and scarcely expect to be ever at one again,' said the wife of a keeper. Another whom I spoke to, gets to church twice a year in a boat, the voyage thither being fourteen miles, along a rugged coast full of sunk rocks. However, the desire to do a duty to offspring goes beyond any such consideration. The want of schools is the subject of constant lament; for without education, how are the children to get on in life. As a make-shift, sometimes an elder girl teaches the younger, or the parents themselves try to take the matter in hand, while the missionary also to a certain extent helps in the business of elementary instruction. I am not without a hope that the Commissioners, with the sanction of the Board of Trade, will fall upon some expedient to insure the education of the numerous children connected with their establishments. A few migratory young schoolmasters making periodical rounds, would go far to remedy the evil.

I inquired if there was much intercourse between the keepers and the widely scattered families of the Gaelic-speaking natives. Very little, was the reply. As a rule, the Board find it necessary to discourage the visits of these poor people to their establishments, on account of personal habits which are adverse to the scrupulous cleanliness insisted on in the dwellings. Those who are acquainted with the miserable condition of the natives of the more remote western islands, will not be surprised at this species of exclusiveness. Wherever placed, the cluster of buildings composing the establishment, with their whitewashed walls, form a kind of oasis in the desert—a bit of civilisation planted and flourishing in the midst of scenes of savage sterility and human degradation.

Mention of these circumstances reminds me that the service has two prizes, to which all keepers with ambitious views properly aspire. These are appointments to the Bell-Rock and Skerryvore, in

both of which the keepers reside for weeks in the midst of the ever-surfing waves, and only enjoy the society of their families at stated intervals. How do we explain the paradox? Simply enough: higher pay, rations, and chiefly convenient schooling for children. The Bell-Rock, with family residence at Arbroath, where schools abound, was on all hands referred to as the *ne plus ultra* of light-house appointments—a thing sighed for, but not easily obtained, and when quitted, looked back upon as a kind of 'Paradise Lost.'

And now, let us be off for Skerryvore, which some people think, myself for one, is worth travelling a thousand miles to see; but the voyage must be left to another chapter.

THE MONKS OF COCKAIGNE.

IN FIVE CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER III.—SIGNS OF DISSOLUTION.

THE Monks of Cockaigne made the best of the inevitable winter; drew the curtains, poked up the fires, lit the gas, and kept the billiard balls rolling; and those friends who were admitted into their circle—and the two guest-chambers were always tenanted—looked back afterwards upon their visit as one of the brightest and merriest halts of their earthly pilgrimage. The brethren fancied at first that they would be dull in the long winter evenings, and they had beds fitted up in their business chambers in London, expecting that town amusements would often detain them, and that the midnight railway journey, which was refreshing in the dog-days, would prove a miserable business during a hard frost. But they found that they did not bore one another at all; on the contrary, the evenings passed too rapidly, and it was more as a duty than for a change that they went after Christmas to see the most gorgeous of the pantomimes.

Yet they watched for spring with the curiosity of childhood; but in this they were not singular, for it is pleasant to observe the interest which hard-working city-men, sleeping in the country, take in the sprouting of the snowdrops and crocuses. That was a grand evening at the Priory upon which Old Tackles announced the appearance of trout under the weir, and the legality of spinning for them. They had him into the refectory, made him drink wine, and engaged his professional services for the morrow, when they all went out, and had a short try with the trolling-rod before breakfast; while Brother Jack returned by an early train, and spent the afternoon in attempts to capture one of those rare prizes of the Thames angler. When the others came home by the dinner-train, they found him in such high spirits that they expected a feast of fresh trout, but he had not been so preternaturally successful as actually to catch a fish. His excitement was caused by his having had a run, an event which seems to be almost as great a source of joy and triumph to a Thames trout-fisher as a fox-hunter, and probably for the same reason. If he kill, there is a trout or a fox the less, and the creatures are too rare to be destroyed without a pang. In short,

when you have a bloodless 'run,' you eat your cake and have it too, in spite of the proverb.

The visible certainty that there was a large trout under the weir, and that amongst the myriads of small worthless fry with which the Thames is so well stocked, he *might* select the angler's bait for his breakfast or supper, animated Brother Jack with such enthusiasm, that he fished for him every morning and evening throughout the spring, and though he caught nothing, the daily attempt was a fair inauguration of the season which had passed so pleasantly the year before; and the boats and canoes were had up from the boat-builder's, and again enlivened the water at the bottom of the garden; the box of bowls was unlocked, and the brethren once more began gradually to resume their summer habits. But when the sun gained ascendency over the chilly mists of early morning, when Tommy Caius was once more called into requisition to fill the lock and fix the ladder for their morning bath, then indeed the Monks of Cockaigne congratulated themselves on the final flight of winter, and the commencement of a new series of harmless and healthful pleasures.

Thus for some weeks everything went on as calmly and delightfully as before, but soon an inexplicable cloud settled over their happiness. First, Brother Joe grew dull and moody, loving to separate himself from the others, and scull or paddle about in solitude, none knew whither; then Brother Percy took to poetry and walking—boating and fishing, he said, only exercised the arms, and he felt his mind and legs dwindling for want of exercise—lastly, and most seriously, Brother Jack met with an accident. He was very skilful and daring in his management of a canoe, and one of his favourite feats was to shoot the rapids. For this purpose, he would get Tommy Caius to raise a couple of the sluices which stayed the water from rushing over the weir in such a volume as to depress the level of the upper river, and so affect the operation of the lock; and then, allowing the current to draw his little craft into the gap thus afforded, he would dash down the liquid-gleaming steep with a velocity which threatened to thrust him to the bottom, but the next moment would shew him paddling safely and calmly away through the boiling waters beneath.

One evening, Brother Percy took his rod and walked off, announcing his intention of fly-fishing from the bank; Brother Joe said that he had letters to write, but would take a scull up the river when he had sent them to the post; so Brothers Jack and Bill got into their canoes, and commenced paddling up-stream amicably together, passed the lock, and continued their course on the upper waters, when the swollen state of the river attracted their attention. There had been a great deal of heavy rain during the two previous days, and the turbid water rolled down in such increased volume, that to prevent its bursting the lock gates, the sluices had been raised, and the torrent roared over the weir in one unbroken cataract. The sight was too tempting to Brother Jack.

'I must shoot those rapids!' he cried. 'I will land just below, afterwards, and carry my canoe over without going through the lock, so it will not take five minutes. Do you mind?'

'Not a bit,' said Brother Bill, who had seen the other perform the feat so often, that he had got to think little of it. 'I think I will follow you.'

'For goodness' sake, don't! You must try it for the first time when the water is lower, and some one is below in a wherry to pick you up, if you upset, which you are almost sure to do; and if you got entangled with your canoe and paddle, swimming might not help you. But now you would be certain to lose your balance, and I should get drowned in trying to save you. Stop here for five minutes; there's a good fellow.'

'All right,' replied Brother Bill; and his companion paddled cautiously towards the brink, looking for the most favourable opening between the posts. He was soon satisfied, and turning the prow of his canoe towards the spot, he gave one or two sharp strokes with his paddle, and then, as he glided over the edge of the torrent, leaned backwards, like a horseman toppling a wall. Unfortunately, the branch of a tree, which had been swept down by the current, had stuck at that very point, where it lay concealed, an inch below the surface. The canoe caught in it, capsized, and in a moment Brother Jack was hurled down headlong, his shoulder striking violently against a post on the right.

Brother Bill was close to the tongue of land which ran from the weir to the lock, and a few strokes of his paddle brought him to it. He sprang ashore, and leaped rather than ran down the bank to the foot of the weir to lend assistance to his friend, but to his horror he could not see him. Brother Jack was a very strong swimmer, but the force with which he had been dashed against the post had paralysed him, and he was sucked under by the eddying waters. At last, that is, after ten seconds, which seemed ten minutes, he appeared on the surface, struggling faintly with one hand in mid-stream. 'Keep up, Jack; I'm coming!' cried Brother Bill, and rushed into the river. The rapid stream hurried both down, and it was with great difficulty he reached him, but he did so, and putting one hand under the armpit of the injured man, who, though half insensible, instinctively refrained from clutching at his deliverer, he managed, by treading water, to keep his face above the surface, and so the pair were swept onwards. This position of affairs lasted a long minute; and Brother Bill, whose mouth and nose kept dipping under the water, was well-nigh exhausted, when his head bumped against something hard, a hand grasped his hair, and a voice cried: 'All right, Mr Stesso, I've got yer; ' and presently Old Tackles, who was out after the invincible trout, dragged them into his punt, where Brother Jack lay motionless.

'Why, he's as lumpy as a barbel!' cried the fisherman with concern; 'but he can't be drowned, cos I send him kicking just afore I collared yer. Mind how yer handle him; I think his arm's broke.'

'Jack! I say Jack, old fellow!' cried Brother Bill, 'you are not drowned, are you? Speak, there's a good chap.'

Brother Jack groaned.

'What on earth is the matter?' cried the voice of Brother Joe, who came sculling up.

'An accident to Jack.'

'What's the row there?' shouted Brother Percy from the bank.

'Accident!' returned Joe. 'Run for a doctor, while I prepare things at home.'

Without further inquiry, Brother Percy threw down his rod, and started off to the surgeon's

house at a run ; while Brother Joe dashed up to the landing-place, which was now not fifty yards off, and rushed up the garden, shouting : 'Molly ! Sally ! Get Mr Markam's bed ready, and begin boiling water and heating cloths.'

Having delivered which bewildering injunctions to the startled domestics, he returned to help Brother Bill and Old Tackles to carry the patient to his chamber. When they had got a pint or two of water out of him, and a good dose of brandy into him, he revived considerably, and anathematised them, when they hurt his arm, to their great joy and relief. Fortunately, there was only a flimsy jersey on the upper part of his body, and this they cut off tenderly, and then, pulling away the sheet off his bed, placed him between the blankets, by which time Brother Percy and the doctor arrived, breathless. Extensive bruises and fracture of the collar-bone, but nothing serious—that was the doctor's utterance ; and then he set the bone, and arranged the pillows, and made him surgically comfortable with bandages and strapping, and prepared to take his departure, saying that he would send something.

'But I need not take it, need I, doctor ?' asked Brother Jack.

'That is on your own responsibility,' he replied laughing. 'The fomentation, however, you had better use freely, and at once ; you will find those bruises very painful else.'

'They hurt tidily now !' grunted Brother Jack.

In a day or two he was about again, and no more needed one of the Brothers to shirk London and look after him ; but when the other three left, he would establish himself in the garden with his pipe, a newspaper, a novel, and Ruff's *Guide to the Turf*, and was quite happy and contented till their return.

So far from feeling dull was he, that he prolonged his convalescence far into the summer, and left the management of his business to his partners and clerks ; though there was really nothing to prevent his daily journey to and fro a fortnight after the accident. But he could not handle an oar, and was dependent upon one of the brethren to pull him about ; and as Brothers Joe and Percy speedily relapsed into their solitary and mysterious habits, that task devolved principally upon Brother Bill, and a stronger friendship sprang up between these two than had ever existed between any of the monks, firm allies as they had been for some years previous to the formation of the Order.

'You saved my life, you know, old fellow,' said Brother Jack one evening when they were skirting the weir in a boat, and contemplating the scene of the accident.

'Don't mention it,' replied the other ; 'you would have done the same for me.'

'Exactly ; but I didn't ; and that makes all the difference. It is a thing one cannot exactly thank a fellow for, but I would do anything to prove that I don't think lightly of it—that is, nearly anything.'

'What is the exceptional deed ?'

'Ah, that is a secret,' said Brother Jack, laughing and shaking his head. 'But I will tell it you, perhaps, some day.'

And indeed it had become evident to Brother Bill that this one too was afflicted with a pensive-ness similar though not equal to that which had toned down the spirits of the others.

What could it mean ? What mystic influence

could there be in the place, that the most sociable of men should become Zimmers in so short a period ? It was all very well for those who were affected, and who enjoyed themselves after their own fashion, but it was a terrible bore for Brother Bill, who retained his pristine nature ; and after vainly waiting for several weeks to see whether they recovered their spirits, he determined to speak out.

So one fine evening, as the four lounged on the bowling-green, smoking their after-dinner cigars, he said : 'Let us hold a chapter.'

'All right. What is the verse ?'

'I have been done. When I joined the Order, I had no idea that you were *bond-fide* Carmelites, affecting a certain amount of jollity for the purpose of proselytising.'

'What on earth do you mean ?'

'I mean,' rejoined Brother Bill, 'that you have all become as melancholy as comic singers, and as unsociable as bitters ; and I mean that our only chance of avoiding the dulness of the cloister is to establish a confessional.'

'With you for the confessor, I suppose ?'

'No ; each in turn shall confess to the other three ; and Brother Percy, who has shewn the greatest depravity, that of reading poetry, shall begin.'

'Placet !' cried the other two. 'Confess, Brother Percy.'

CHAPTER IV.—CONFESSION.

'Eh ?' said the *impenitent* ; 'has any one noticed a change in me ? Oh ! I certainly thought at times that I was rather indifferent company ; but Brother Joe seemed so much worse, that I hoped he would conduct attention away from me, even as a thunder-cloud draws the lightning from one less highly charged. That simile does not sound all right, but I am in training to write a poem for myself, those professional fellows not half expressing my feelings, and I must practise my imagery.'

'Brother,' said the Prior of the week reprovingly, 'you are making your last dying—No, I mean your confession, and it ill becomes you to practise your poetry therein. We want simple facts.'

'All right,' replied the rebuked one : 'then the fact is, I have got a heart complaint.'

'What ! Angina pectoris ?'

'No, that is not her name. When our brotherhood was formed, I deemed myself iron-clad against all the arrows of Cupid ; but a gun of heavier metal and sharper bolt than I dreamed of has been brought forward to penetrate my sides—I beg pardon, for the last fortnight I have been thinking in comparisons. The long and the short of the matter is, I am spoony ; and as, after a long struggle against my weakness, I have finally determined to get introduced to the lady, and marry her, I was seeking for an opportunity of breaking the intelligence to you, and am glad that Brother Bill has afforded it.'

'A lapsed bachelor !' groaned the latter, holding up his hands.

'I really could not help it,' continued the fallen Brother. 'I was fly-fishing innocently over the shoal off Bargeman's Folly one day, when a young lady came with a camp-stool and a portfolio, and commenced sketching on the bank, not twenty yards from me. The dace would not rise, and I had nothing to distract my attention, so I looked at

her, and oh, my heart turned to water! I had seen her casually before, but she had never made the impression upon me that she did that day. I will not describe her, first, because I could not do justice to her beauty; and secondly, because you would all fall in love with her likewise, and I do not wish for rivals. A dog attended her, a pug, one of those hideous little creatures which ladies are so fond of, probably because their intense ugliness acts as a foil to their own charms, but whose only other merit consists in the fact, that they cannot bite you, because their tongues are too big for their mouths. Presently, Bob, the butcher's bull terrier, whose renowned performance upon rats we witnessed in the winter, came trotting up, and Pug went to meet him. With that wonderful sagacity which distinguishes those animals, each knew that the other was also a dog, and they wagged their tails, and played about, and putting their noses together, communicated their ideas. But soon the pug, pampered and insolent, made some remark derogatory to Bob or his belongings, for the terrier's tail suddenly stiffened, and he seized the rash offender by the throat. The pug yelped chokingly; his lovely mistress sprang up, scattering her sketches to the ground, and screamed musically for assistance. My skiff was anchored; so I stepped into the water, which was not knee-deep, and waded to the shore. To wrap my handkerchief round Bob's tail, and then bite it till he relinquished his hold, grasping him tightly by the collar the while, lest he should merely transfer his teeth to my own windpipe; to swing him round my head, and hurl him far into the river; to raise the bleeding, howling pug, and place him in his mistress's arms—all this was the work of a moment. She thanked me with effusion, and with her every word I became more and more deeply enamoured. She lived on the Aitham side of the river, and was anxious to get home at once, and seek surgical assistance for my rival. As it was some distance to the ferry, I offered to take her across; she consented; so I waded out, drew up the anchor, brought the skiff to shore, placed her and the pug inside it, gathered up her sketches and the camp-stool, ferried her across, and escorted her home. When she had thanked me for the last time, and the door closed upon her, I was an altered man. Since then, I have walked about the lanes and fields, and wandered on the river-banks, in hopes of meeting her. I have done so five times, and raised my hat, receiving in return a bow and a smile. And there I am at present; but I can stand it no longer, and I must get an introduction, and call.'

"Alas!" said Brother Bill, and it was the only appropriate comment upon the story; but Brother Joe misinterpreted the observation.

"Ah, yes," said he, "nothing but a lass could have broken up our happy fraternity."

"What! are you too in love, then?"

"I am. Only I have had no romantic adventure like Brother Percy's, nor have I ever spoken to the object of my passion, as he has; yet, like him, I am determined to make the acquaintance of the lady, and ask her to incapacitate me for a Monk of Cockaigne. My passion has been of slow growth: I was slightly smitten on the first Sunday that we were here, and I have got worse and worse with each successive morning sermon."

"Oh!" groaned Brother Bill. "Short-sighted that we were! We ought to have had a private chapel. I rather wondered, I must confess, at your

very regular attendance at divine service. But why have you, too, isolated yourself so much? Have you also been constantly dodging the object of your affections?"

"Not exactly," replied Brother Joe, stammering. "The fact is, I was a great ass; but the house she lives in can be seen from the river, and I, I——"

"You passed your time in rowing backwards and forwards, in hopes of catching an occasional glimpse of your charmer's dress between the garden bushes?"

"Ah, Brother Bill, you have been in love yourself!"

"O yes; I have had the measles, the hooping-cough, and most other infantile disorders."

"Fellow-victim, shake hands!" exclaimed Brother Percy to Brother Joe; and they did so.

"I should like to see the two ladies," said Brother Jack after a pause. "I wonder whether I have noticed either of them."

"Well, there she is!" "Well, there she is!" shouted the two simultaneously. And the young lady in the next house was seen coming out of the garden-door and descending the steps.

"Nonsense, Joe; don't chaff, because I am really in earnest," said Brother Percy.

"I was never less inclined to joke in my life, my dear fellow. That is the lady I mean to ask to be my wife!"

"Then I pity you, my boy, for we are rivals."

"Pity me! Confound your conceit! Excuse me, my dear fellow, but really, your vanity is absurd."

"Sir!"

"Come, come, Brothers, don't quarrel," said Brother Jack. "If you are each in love with the same lady, and that lady is Miss Forrester, who lives with her mother in the adjoining house, I am sorry for both of you, as she is engaged."

"Engaged! And to whom?"

"To me. Mrs Forrester sent to inquire after me at the time of my accident; I called to return thanks—saw Mary, and, by Jove, she struck me much as she did you. I spent a considerable part of the days in her society while you three were away on business; improved the opportunity to the best of my poor ability, and this very morning she consented to become mine."

CHAPTER V.—DESECRATION.

Three years later, Mr William Stesso—no longer, alas! Brother Bill—went to see some old college-friends at Oxford at the time of the commemoration, and when the festivities were over, he joined a party which agreed to row down all the way to London by easy stages; and so he once more passed the house where the Monks of Cockaigne had lived together for a brief space so happily. Under pretence of heat and want of breath, he persuaded his companions to rest upon their oars, while he gazed on the well-remembered spot.

The rose-trees and shrubs had sprung up wonderfully; a verandah had been built, which was overgrown with jasmine and honeysuckle; croquet hoops were ranged round the bowling-green, and a group of crinolined ladies and simpering dandies were engaged in that flirtiferous game. He raised his eyes in disgust to the top story, and saw looking-glasses and a wash-hand basin reared against the large plate-glass windows, and even while he gazed, a woman became visible, bearing in her arms a long-clothed baby, which she was swaying to and

fro. The billiard-room had been turned into a nursery!

‘Pull on all!’ he cried; and dashed his oar into the unchanging stream.

A T A M U S S E L - F A R M.

HAVING often heard of the curious industry that has been carried on so successfully for many centuries in the Bay of Aiguillon, in France, I resolved to visit the place, in order to see for myself what had been really achieved. The industry in question consists of the systematic breeding and cultivation of mussels. Now, as mussels are, in these days of fishery-competition, of vast importance, if not for food, at least as bait for the capture of the food-fishes, too much cannot be told concerning them, the more especially if the telling of what one knows will induce British fishermen—who trust a good deal to chance for their bait, and who frequently cannot go to the fishing-grounds for want of it—to do what is done by the fishermen of France, who could shew them how to insure a constant supply of that absolute necessary of a successful fishery, by the simple plan of growing it.

It is no exaggeration to say that, although the British people are shy of eating the mussel, except when it is cooked for sauce—and a very excellent sauce it makes—countless millions are annually required by our fishermen for bait. There is one little fishing-village in Scotland which I know, from personal investigation, uses for its own share, for the baiting of the deep-sea lines required in the cod and haddock fishery, close on five millions of these molluscs, which have all to be sought and gathered from the natural beds, the men, and the women as well, having frequently to go long distances to obtain them. These figures will not be thought to be exaggerated when I say that each deep-sea line requires about twelve hundred mussels to bait it; and as many of the boats carry eight or ten lines, it is easy to check the calculation. The fishermen, it is hoped, may by and by come to grow their own mussels, as do the industrious men of Aiguillon; and if they do not turn mussel-farmers after what I have to tell them, they will have themselves to blame for the ultimate extinction of the mussel, for the natural scalps are giving way under the present increasing demand for bait.

‘Where is Aiguillon?’ was naturally enough the first question I had to answer, after determining on my tour; but no one could answer it. I asked many who are interested in fishery matters, but none of them had heard of the mussel-farm. Aiguillon, they said, was mentioned in Murray’s Guide, and doubtless the site of the fishery would be there. But the mussel-farm is not at the Aiguillon mentioned by Murray, which is a town of nearly two thousand inhabitants, on the left bank of the Lot, about a mile above its influx into the Garonne. My Aiguillon, indeed, is not even on the same line of railway, although it is at an equally great distance from Pall Mall. In fact, Murray contains nothing at all about my Aiguillon. Murray has a soul above mussels, and, to speak the truth, doesn’t even seem to care much about oysters, seeing that he sometimes neglects to mention localities where they are grown in the greatest profusion. I found my Aiguillon at the port of Esnandes, which is itself a curious out-of-the-way place.

In order to see the mussel-farm, it is necessary first to get to Paris, and to take the Orleans Railway to Poitiers, then to change to the line for La Rochelle, after reaching which place, a *voiture* must be hired for the rest of the journey, Esnandes being about seven kilomètres from Rochelle. I need not weary the reader with a description of all that is to be seen on the Orleans Railway, which, as all the travelling world at least knows, runs through the most historical part of France. Looking from the window of the railway carriage, I enjoyed for a few hours the lovely champagne scenery of the claret district of France. There are vine-fields, and big joint-stock walnut trees, and cherry orchards, and cherry orchards, walnut trees, and vineyards over and over again, all the way to Bordeaux. Then there are little patches of water; and dark-green grassy quadrangles laid down every here and there, guarded by those tall alder trees one sees in such profusion all over the continent. Every here and there, too, may be seen a distant château on its finely-wooded hill; then come a few old farmhouses, their inner yards alive with the minute industry of the plodding husbandmen. Anon we pass the outskirts of old historical towns, tempting one to break one’s journey.

It might have well suited others to perform these pleasures of travel—my errand was to see *la moule*. History had no charms for me till I had seen the mussel-farms, which I had come so far to visit. To my exceeding astonishment, almost no one in La Rochelle knew anything about the industry of Aiguillon. I had to search far and wide to obtain information as to how to get to the place; another exemplification of the old story, that one may live all his life in London, and not be able to find his way to St Paul’s. By virtue of a little Scottish perseverance, and the expenditure of much bad French, I at length found out that it was at Esnandes that they cultivated *la moule*. So, procuring a *voiture*, and a *garçon* to drive it, I sallied away out through the gates and barriers of La Rochelle; and after a pleasant drive through the vineyards and small farms of the district, on each of which there appeared to be a little flock of black sheep, I arrived in about an hour’s time at my destination, much to the astonishment of the idle poultry and young dogs of the neighbourhood, which looked and acted as if they never had seen a *voiture* or a Scotchman before.

The port of Esnandes is very much like all other fishing-villages, and the fisher-people like all other fishing-people. As you enter the town, you feel that it has the usual ancient and fish-like smell; and you see, as you suppose, the same little boys with the overgrown small-clothes, that you meet with in the fishing-villages of England or Scotland. After passing a little way down the one street of the village, you observe all the way, right and left, the invariable mussel-middens, the worn-out old fish-baskets, and the various other insignia of the trade of the people, the like of which you can also see at Whitstable or Cockenzie. The people waken up the moment it is buzzed about that a stranger has arrived. At first, I thought the population were all out at sea, but I was so quickly surrounded by an inquisitive little crowd, that I speedily gave up that idea; and as soon as I had explained my errand to the buxom landlady of the village café, I was provided with a guide, who kindly escorted me to the *bouchots* (fishing hurdles), or rather to the

dépôt of the boucholiers, which is about a quarter of a mile from the village.

Having alighted from the carriage, I looked around me with some curiosity; but I saw no farm of mussels, no appearance even of there being a common fishery. About a mile away to the right, there was moored a small fleet of the common flat-bottomed fishery-boats peculiar to the coast. A few miles to the left, lay the Ile de Ré, famous for its oyster-beds; but where was the object of my search—the mussel-farm? Well, to make a long story short, the farm was at that particular hour covered with water; but, as the tide was on the ebb, I speedily obtained a view of the vast mud-fields to which the people of Esnandes are indebted for their peculiar fish-commerce. The story of the translation of these vast sloughs of mud into fertile fields of industry, productive of comfort and wealth, is short and simple, for the discovery of the bouchot was purely accidental. An Irish vessel, laden with sheep, having been wrecked in the bay, so long ago as the year 1235, only one out of all the crew was saved. This man's name was Walton, and he became the founder of the present industry by means of the bouchot system of cultivation. On finding himself saved, he at once set about finding a means of earning his own food, so that he might not be a burden upon the poor fishermen who had rescued him from the ravening waters, and who were themselves at the time well-nigh destitute of every comfort of life.

All around him, however, as Walton soon perceived, was one vast expanse of liquid mud, and what could any man do on such a barren field? Walton speedily solved the problem. He first of all invented a mode of travelling upon the mud-bed, for walking was an impossibility, as at every step he sank up to the knees in the miry clay. This boat is called a *pirouge* by the boucholiers, and it is still in use. By means of this simple machine, which I will by and by describe, Walton was able to travel along and explore the muddy coast, by which he found out that vast numbers of land and sea birds used to assemble on the waters and in the mud in search of food. A kind of purse-net for the capture of these birds at once suggested itself to the hungry sailor. This being made and set on the mud as a trap to float with the tide, was found to answer admirably, and every night large numbers of aquatic birds were captured in its purse-like folds. It was out of that little example of a destitute sailor's ingenuity that the present industry of Aiguillon was developed, for it was not long before Walton found the strong posts to which he had affixed his net all covered over with the spawn of the edible mussel; these he found grew very rapidly, and when mature, had a much finer flavour than the mud-grown bivalves from whence the spawn had floated. The Irishman soon saw how he could multiply his own food-supplies, and create at the same time a lasting industry for the benefit of the poor people among whom he had been thrown by his unfortunate shipwreck; he therefore went on multiplying his stakes, till he found that there was no end to the produce; so that in due time this accidental discovery became a rich inheritance to the fisher-folks of the district, for in ten years after the shipwreck, the bay was covered with an appropriate and successful mussel-collecting apparatus, out of which has grown the present extensive commerce.

The work of cultivation at Aiguillon is carried

on very systematically. I shall give what I learned about it, just as I saw it myself, or as it was described to me by my guide, a very civil and immensely volatile fisherman, who had the whole theory and practice of mussel-farming at his finger-ends, or rather at the end of his tongue. It was truly curious to consider that the same mode of cultivating and working was going on that had prevailed from the beginning—the invention having been perfect from the first. One of the most curious phases of the whole industry is the mode of progression over the fields which has been adopted by the men, for each man has not only to paddle his own canoe on these soft fields of mud, but if he have a visitor, he has to paddle his boat as well. The manner of progression is very primitive. The man kneels in his little wooden vessel with one leg, the other, being encased in a great boot, is fixed deep in the mud; a lift of the little canoe with both hands, and a simultaneous shove with the mud-engulfed leg, and lo! a progress of many inches is achieved; this action frequently repeated by the industrious labourers, soon overcomes the distance between the different fields; and when a new *trousseau* has to be carried out to the bouchots, or a stranger has to be conducted over the fields, two men will load a canoe, and work it out between them, not, however, without a few jolts and jerks, which, like a ride on a camel's back, is rather tiring to the unaccustomed. When three of the canoes are joined together by means of pieces of stout rope, the boucholier in the first one uses his left leg as the propelling power, while the man in No. 3 uses his right leg, and by this means they get along in a straighter line and with greater speed. This peculiar boat-exercise has not a little of the comic element in it, especially when one sees a fleet of more than a hundred narrow boats all propelled in the same eccentric manner by upwards of one hundred merry boucholiers. I may mention that the mud at Aiguillon is unusually smooth and soft; there are no sun-baked furrows to interrupt the progress of the canoe, a fact that is due to the presence of a little animal, which accomplishes for the boucholier what a regiment of a thousand soldiers could not perform.

In addition to the large and strong stakes originally used as holdfasts for his bird-nets, Walton planted others, in long rows, in the form of a double V, with their apex open to the sea, the sides being interlaced with branches of trees, to which the mussels, by means of their byssus, affixed themselves with great aptitude. These bouchots were also so arranged one with another as to serve as traps for the taking of such fish and crustaceans as frequent the coast; so that the fishermen had thus a double chance, being, of course, always assured, when there is no fish, of a canoeful of mussels.

The men in search of fish depart for the farm a little time before the tide recedes, and taking their places at the mouth or apex of the V, they affix a small net to the opening, so that they are sure to intercept any fish that may have come in to feed with the previous tide. I made very particular inquiries into the constitution of the farm, and although disappointed at not finding it, as I was led to expect, a vast scene of perfect co-operation, I was pleased to learn that, although the bouchots had many owners, there was no violent competition among those who owned them. Some of these mussel-farmers have three or four bouchots, and the very poorest among them have a half, or at

least a third share in one. The system of family co-operation prevails very largely; I found, as in the case of the celebrated walnut-trees so often quoted, that one or two families, grandfathers, sons, and grandchildren were often the owners of several bouchots, which they worked for their joint benefit, dividing the profits at the end of the season.

The farm occupies a very large space of ground, equal to eight kilomètres, and is laid out in four fields or divisions, each of which has its peculiar name and use. There are at least 500 bouchots, and each one represents a length of 450 mètres, forming a total wall of strong basket-work, all for the growth of mussels, equal to a length of 225,000 mètres, and rising six feet above the mud-bed on which it is erected. Great pains are taken to keep the bouchots in good order; repairs are continually being made; and along the protecting wall of the cliff by which the bay is bounded, there are to be seen what my guide called the *tousseau* of the bouchots—great, strong wooden stakes twelve feet long, and of considerable girth. These are sunk into the mud to a depth of six feet, the upper portion being the receptacle of a garniture of strong but supple branches, twisted in the form of basket-work, on which are grown the annual crops of mussels. The bouchots have different names, according to their uses and their situation. The *bouchots du bas* are those furthest away in the water: these are very seldom left uncovered by the tide; they are formed of very large and very strong solitary stakes, planted so near each other that there are three of them to each mètre. The duty of these stakes is to enact the part of spat-collectors—the spat is locally called *naissain* at the Port of Esnandes—so that there may be always a store of infant mussels for the peopling and repeopling of such of the palisades as may accidentally become barren. My guide, in describing to me the operations of the farm, used agricultural terms, such as seeding, planting, transplanting, replanting, &c., and he told me that operations of some kind are continually going on all over the farm. When it is not seed or harvest time, the bouchots have to be repaired or the canoes mended.

As near as I could understand, the spat of the natural mussel which voluntarily fixed itself to the outer rows of posts, attains about February or March to the size of a grain of flax-seed. In May, the young mussels are about as big as a lentil, and in about two months more they will attain to the dimensions of a haricot bean—the men of Esnandes then call the mussel a *renouvelain*—which is the proper time for the planting to begin; and this operation was in progress during my visit. It is simple but effective. When a few canoe-loads of these young mussels are required for the seeding of the more inland bouchots, the men proceed to the single or collecting stakes at the lowest state of the tide, armed with long poles, having blunt hooks at the end, by means of which they scrape off the seedlings. The men do not, however, scrape off more of the mussels than they require for the operation in hand, which must be completed before the flow of the next tide. Having filled a few baskets, each man paddles his canoe to the seat of work, and there commences the first stage of the work or planting, which is effected in a curious but characteristic way, the operation being called *la bâtie* by those engaged in it. Taking a good handful of the mussels, they are skilfully tied up by the boucholier in a bag of old netting or canvas,

and then deftly fastened in the interstices of the palisades, or bouchot basket-work, each group of mussels being, of course, fastened at such a distance as to have plenty of room to grow. Left there, the byssus of the animal soon forms a point of attachment; and the bag rotting away by means of the water, speedily leaves the mussels hanging in numerous vine-like clusters on the bouchots, where they increase in size with such great rapidity, as speedily to demand the performance of the next operation in mussel culture, which is called the transplanting. It is conducted with a view to the attainment of two ends; firstly, the thinning of overcrowded bouchots; and, secondly, to bring the ripe mussels gradually nearer to the shore, so as to make their removal all the more easy at the proper time. The change of habitation is effected precisely as has already been described; the mussels are again tied up in purses of old netting, although not so particularly as before; again the mussel, whose power in this way is well known, weaves itself a new cable, and the bivalve clings to its new resting-place as tenaciously as ever. It may be asked, why the mussel-farmers should so plant the mussels as that they will require constant thinning; but the reason is, that it is desirable for the purpose of their proper fattening that the mussels should be always, if possible, covered by the salt water; this, however, is not compatible with the extent of the crop; but all that can be done is done, and the mussels are kept in the front-ranks as long as possible. A third and last change brings the mussels as near the shore as they can ever get, so long as they are ungathered.

The labour of planting and transplanting goes on incessantly, till all the spat that had found a resting-place on the solitary stakes—that is, the advanced-guard—has been dealt with. The labour of all these varied operations is constant, and is carried on by old and young, male and female, both day and night, at times when the tide is suitable. Some portions of the farm are always under water; other portions of it, again, are uncovered at the ebbing of the tide; and this circumstance, I was told, has a great influence on the quality of the mussel; those being the best, as may be supposed, which are longest submerged, and kept at the greatest distance from the mud. Although the greatest possible care is taken to keep the mussels from being affected by the copious muddy deposits of the place, by means of allowing a good flow of water between the base of the bouchots and the sea-surface, yet some of the bunches become deteriorated, in spite of all the precautions that can be taken. This, of course, distresses the boucholiers, as one of their points is the superior flavour of their produce; indeed, it was the superiority of the mussels, as discovered by accident through Walton's bird-net, which was set so as to float high above the mud—the quality of the mussel more than the quantity—that influenced Walton to commence as a mussel-farmer; and to this day, it is still quality more than quantity that the boucholiers study at Esnandes. After the process of about a year's farming has been undergone, the mussels are considered to be ready for the market, and by the care of the farmer, the mussels are in season all the year round, although, of course, not so good for food at some periods of the year as at others; thus, the Aiguillon mussels are not so fine in the spring months as they are in the autumnal periods of the year, when they become

deliciously fat and savoury; indeed, I can bear testimony, having had a feast of them, to the fact of their being better, larger in size, and more pronounced in their flavour than any of the British mussels I have tasted. About April, the mussels become milky and unpalatable, although there are still many branches of them fit for the market. It is in the months between July and January that the great harvest goes on, and the chief money-business is done. If the mussels are to be sent to a distance, they are separated and cleared from all kinds of dirt, packed in hampers and bags, and sent away on the backs of horses or in carts; while those required for more local consumption are kept in pits dug at the bottom of the cliff, and within the enclosure where the men keep the trousseau of the bouchots. There are no less than a hundred and forty horses and about a hundred carts engaged in the trade; and the mussels are distributed within a radius of about a hundred miles of Esnandes, more than thirty thousand journeys being made in the service. In addition to this land-carrying, forty or fifty barques are in the habit of visiting the port, to bear away the mussels to still greater distances, making in all about seven hundred and fifty voyages per annum.

Does the mussel-farm pay? will, of course, be asked by practical people. Yes, it pays. I have obtained the following figures to shew that mussel-farming pays very well, not to speak of what is obtained by the round and flat fish which are daily captured through the peculiar construction of the bouchots. Every bouchot will yield a load of mussels for each mètre of its length; and this load is of the value of six francs; and the whole farm at Esnandes is said to yield an annual revenue of about a million and a quarter of francs, or, to speak roundly, upwards of fifty-two thousand pounds per annum; and when it is taken into account that this large sum of money is, as nearly as possible, a gift from nature to the inhabitants, as there is no rent to pay for the farm, no seed—as is the case at the Whitstable oyster-farm—to provide, no manure to buy—only the labour necessary for cultivation to be given, British fishermen will easily comprehend the advantages to be derived from mussel-farming.

B R O U G H T T O L I G H T.

CHAPTER XXIII.—MR DUPLESSIS WINS THE GAME.

THE master of Belair had been sick almost unto death, but was now slowly recovering; and the hush of dread expectancy, which had brooded like an ominous cloud over the Hall and its inmates, so long as the life of Sir Philip was in danger, had already become as a shadow of the past; and the well-trained household had imperceptibly glided back into the easy noiseless groove which circled the dull round of everyday duties at Belair. Yes, the baronet was slowly recovering; he was 'much—very much better,' were the exact words which emanating, in the first instance, in the discreetest of whispers, from the lips of Dr Roach, spread rapidly from mouth to mouth as something that everybody was glad to hear; for the sick man was universally beloved. But Dr Roach knew, and Sir Philip knew, that this attack, conquered with difficulty, was merely the forerunner of other attacks still more severe, before which the failing forces of life must ultimately succumb.

Gaston Spencelaugh had been summoned from Paris—an effeminate handsome young man, more at home in the drawing-room than the hunting-field, and fonder of a billiard-cue than a horse—who, now that all immediate danger to his father was over, went mooning listlessly about the house, smoking interminable cigars, thinking a good deal of some absent Fifine, and voting the whole business which had called him from pleasant Paris, a bore.

'You may be sure, dear, that it has been a very harassing time for your Marguerite,' wrote Lady Spencelaugh to one of her confidential correspondents. 'Poor dear Sir Philip has required constant attention night and day, and although not equal to the task of nursing him myself, I have felt it incumbent on me to be constantly on the spot, and to superintend personally every arrangement for his comfort. Gaston, dear fellow! is at home: very handsome, though it is I who say it; and with a style quite *comme il faut*! In writing thus, her Ladyship had considerably magnified her slight attentions to the sick man, which had merely consisted in three or four visits each day to the room where he lay; on which occasions she would take a momentary glance at him, and murmur to the attendants: 'Poor dear Sir Philip! How distressing to see him thus!' and then turning to the head-nurse, she would add: 'Be sure, Mrs Smith, that you carry out the doctor's instructions minutely; and let me be apprised the moment you see a change either one way or the other;' and so would glide softly back to her own apartments, where she would sit by the fire with a screen in her hand, for she was always careful of her complexion, and muse on what might come to pass in case Sir Philip should not recover. 'With my savings and his father's, Gaston would be tolerably well off, and could afford to make a very decent figure in London society. He would go into parliament, of course, when he had sown his wild oats; and there is no reason why he should not marry into the peerage; and then— Well, well.'

But Sir Philip Spencelaugh, although thus neglected in one instance, was not left entirely to the care of hirelings. The watchful eye and tender hand of Frederica were ever near him. She had a room fitted up for herself close to his own, that she might be always on the spot; and her loving face was the first that met his gaze when his feeble senses flickered back to a consciousness of earthly things. He blessed her as he lay thus, and called her his own, his darling. They were the first words he had spoken for many weary days and nights; and Frederica had to hurry out, that she might give way in solitude to the rush of happy tears that welled up from her heart.

Nearly five months had passed since Frederica gave that promise to her uncle that she would try to look upon Mr Duplessis with more favourable eyes, and grant him an opportunity of pleading his cause in person. It was a promise that was repented of as soon as made; and, as we have already seen, the Canadian derived so slight an advantage from the permission accorded him, that he was fain to pass it by altogether as though it had never been given, and await the quiet processes of time, which, when assisted by his own skilful by-play, might work some change in his favour, rather than frighten his beautiful quarry by a bold rush, and so lose her at once and for ever. He had consented to

play a patient game, in the full expectation of ultimately winning it : so accustomed had he been to winning such delicate hazards, sometimes almost without an effort, that, for a long time, no possibility of failure was suffered to cloud his mind; but at length it began to dawn dimly on him—and it was a thought that touched him to the quick with a sort of savage soreness—that he had been struggling all this time against a barrier of ice, before whose clear coldness all his petty wiles and stratagems, and little love-making arts, withered like exotics before the breath of winter. Admiration for his many brilliant qualities, Frederica might and did feel. She was young, and had a considerable fund of enthusiasm to draw upon; and she could not help liking this man who shone out so superior to the ordinary ruck of visitors at Belair. Then, again, he had a large claim on her gratitude, from the fact of having risked his own life to save that of her uncle: it was a deed that invested him in her eyes with a sort of heroic halo, through which many more faults than he allowed to be visible on the surface would have paled and grown dim. But, granting Duplessis all these points in his favour, and no one was more capable than he of making the most of them, the great indisputable fact still remained, that he found himself utterly unable to advance in her good graces beyond that coign of vantage to which he had so patiently worked his way, but which he had all along merely looked upon in the light of a stepping-stone to something higher. Let him venture but a step beyond it—and now and then he did so venture, treading delicately and with caution—and straightway the barrier of ice rose up before him, and he fell back to his old position, chilled and cowed, he hardly knew how or why, and with a bitter sense of humiliation and defeat working within him. Yes, five months had come and gone since that bright summer afternoon on which Sir Philip Spencelaugh told him of the promise which he had wrung from his niece, and the game seemed still as far from being won as ever. His patience was worn out at last; he was growing desperate; something must be done, and that immediately, for the demon of improvidence was knocking loudly at his door. He would make one last bold effort, assisted by the baronet, to win his beautiful prize; and then—why, then, if he were unsuccessful, he would let her go, and trouble himself no further about the grapes he could not reach. There were other grapes, not bad fruit by any means, as such things go, within his reach for the plucking; would it not be wiser in him quietly to accept this other fruit, and make the best of it, rather than waste further precious time on what was so evidently unattainable? There was Lady Winternere, for instance, just home from the German Spas; a widow well dowered, and still, at forty years of age, passably handsome, who looked with favourable eyes on the handsome Canadian, and was by no means indisposed to encourage his attentions. As the husband of her Ladyship, even though her jointure were tied up beyond his reach, and as the master of Oakthorpe Grange, he would at once take a certain position in society; and it would not be his fault if he did not so *ménager* that all rents and revenues should percolate through his own fingers, and leave some grains of precious dust by the way. In any case, for such as he, the lot was by no means an unenviable one. But to give up for ever his sweet Frederica!—not forgetting all that she was heiress

to—there was the pang. He really loved Miss Spencelaugh, as much as it lay in his nature to love any one, other than himself; but he could not afford to waste more time in a fruitless love-chase. One last bold effort; and then, should he fail—Lady Winternere and Oakthorpe Grange.

Late, one dull wintry afternoon, Sir Philip Spencelaugh sat propped up in bed, turning over with heedless fingers the leaves of a large-print copy of *Massillon*, bound in old calf, which lay on the coverlet before him. A shaded lamp stood on a small table close by his bed, and Crooke, his old and faithful body-servant, was moving noiselessly about the anteroom, within call. The old man's face was wan and pinched; but his eyes were brighter, and beamed with a fuller intelligence, Frederica thought, than she had seen in them for many months. At length the baronet spoke. 'Crooke, go and inquire whether Mr Duplessis is in the house. If he is, I should like to see him.' Then when Crooke had gone, he went on, talking to himself: 'No time to lose. I'll have it settled at once—at once. If she doesn't love him now, she will learn to do so after marriage. Girls like her don't know their own minds for a week together. No time to lose. It must be settled at once.'

Mr Duplessis was ushered into the room. After the usual greetings and inquiries were over, the old man motioned to the Canadian to seat himself on a chair close by the bed. Sir Philip lay back on his pillows for a minute or two with closed eyes before he spoke. 'Henri, my friend,' he said at last, 'I want to know how your suit with Frederica prospers. Is the wedding-day fixed yet?'

When Duplessis entered the room, it was with the full intention of stating his case to Sir Philip, but the baronet's question took from him the necessity of doing so. 'Miss Spencelaugh and I,' he replied, 'hold precisely the same position with regard to each other that we did six months ago.'

'How is that?' asked Sir Philip anxiously. 'Are your views or wishes changed in any way?'

'Not in the slightest degree,' replied Duplessis. 'To win the hand of Miss Spencelaugh is still the dearest hope of my life.'

'Then why haven't you won it? She gave you a chance, didn't she, months ago? Why did you neglect to take advantage of it?'

'The affection your niece has for you, Sir Philip, made her yield the point in opposition to her own wishes on the subject.'

'Pooh, man! That's more than you know. Don't you pretend to read the riddle of a young girl's heart: it lies beyond either your skill or mine to do so. But when once the point was conceded in your favour, why didn't you make the most of it?'

'I did make the most of it, in one sense. I pressed my suit quietly and unobtrusively. I did my best to work my way into the good graces of Miss Spencelaugh, and I failed. I still love her as dearly as ever I did, but I am afraid that she will never look upon me as anything more than a friend.'

'Tut, man! You are far too timid a wooer. No wench's heart that isn't given away beforehand can stand against a bold, resolute lover. They are soft, timorous things at the best of times, but as sly as the very deuce. If I had stood in your shoes, my boy, I would have forced Freddy into loving me—yes, sir, forced her!'

'Miss Spencelaugh is not a simple boarding-

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school miss, to be won by a few honeyed phrases, and empty protestations of affection.'

'She is the best girl in the world, sir, though it is I who say it!' exclaimed the baronet warmly.—'And do you mean to say, Henri, that the minx isn't fond of you?'

'I am afraid, Sir Philip, that such is really the case,' replied the Canadian in a low, regretful voice.

'I tell you again, my dear boy, that you have gone too timidly about your courting. Freddy must like you in her secret heart, even though she won't acknowledge as much. I set my heart on this match long ago, and I don't think I could die happy unless it were to come off. I'll see Freddy about it myself; I'll see her at once. There's not much that she would refuse her old uncle.'

The Canadian's eyes glittered, but he answered the baronet in a low, earnest voice: 'Not for worlds, my dear Sir Philip, would I have Miss Spencelaugh's inclinations forced in the slightest degree in my favour.'

'No one wants to force her inclinations, sir. But I say again, there are not many things she would refuse her old uncle. Pour me out a little of that cordial, and then tell Crooke to ask Miss Spencelaugh to come to me.'

'But, my dear sir, you would not?—'

'Not a word, Duplessis; I tell you I will have my own way in this matter, so don't try to turn me from it.'

'But you surely don't wish me to remain in the room during your interview with Miss Spencelaugh?' persisted Duplessis.

'You shall remain in the room, but out of sight. Freddy shall not know that you are so near; you shall hide behind that screen. Nay, I will have it so. No remonstrances, or, by Heaven! I will never speak to you again.—Never saw Farren in *The School for Scandal*—did you? No, I thought not. Then you missed a treat—you missed a treat. His screen-scene was the sublime of comedy.—But away with you, out of sight; I hear Freddy's voice as she talks to Crooke.'

The Canadian vanished; and next moment Frederica entered the room, and hastening up to the bed, flung her arms round the old man's neck, and kissed him fondly. 'You are better to-day, dear,' she said; 'I can see it in your face without your telling me.'

'Better—yes. The sight of you always makes me better. But, Freddy, I want to talk to you on a serious matter. I want to know how it is that you and Duplessis?—'

'We will wait till you are quite well, dear uncle, before we talk about that,' said Frederica hastily.

'Not so, darling; there's no time like the present time. I have been thinking much on this matter while I've been lying here. I'm anxious about it. You don't know how deeply my heart is set on this thing. Five months ago, you promised that you would try to like my friend a little—that you would try to look more favourably on his suit. Has the task been too hard a one for you, darling?'

'I do like Mr Duplessis—as a friend.'

'But you do not love him?'

'No,' said Frederica faintly.

'Pardon your old uncle the question, Freddy: but no one else has stolen your heart away without my knowing it?'

Frederica did not answer, but a slight motion of her head implied dissent.

'And yet you do not love Duplessis?' resumed the baronet. 'Then my most cherished scheme falls to the ground, and my last earthly wish will never be realised. I cannot tell you, darling, how I have longed for this match to be brought about. But there—there! It cannot be, I suppose, and I will urge you no further.'

'Why wish me to marry at all, dear uncle? My greatest happiness is to think that I shall always stay with you—always be as a daughter to you. I wish for nothing beyond this.'

'But I shall not always be here, Freddy. Not many more days are left me in this world; on that point I am not deceived. But go now—I cannot say more; I care not how soon the end comes.' All the light and life seemed to fade out of his face as he sank back on his pillows; the hollows deepened under his eyes, and his thin lips were contracted as with a spasm of intense pain. Frederica looked on in sore distress, all her woman's nature at war within her.

'But, dear uncle, Mr Duplessis himself?—'

'Is here to answer for himself,' said the Canadian, as he stepped from behind the screen. 'Pardon me, Sir Philip, but I could play the eavesdropper no longer.'

'Listening, sir!' said Frederica, with a flash of scorn from her beautiful eyes.

'All my fault, Freddy—all my fault,' said the baronet: 'I made him go there against his own wishes. I questioned him, and he told me you did not care for him, and I—I thought he was wrong, and I told him to go behind the screen, and hear for himself.'

'A most unfair advantage to take of any one, said Frederica coldly.

'Ay, ay, perhaps so. I see it now,' said the old man wearily; 'I was foolish enough to hope—but it matters not now what I hoped. It is all over—all over.'

The baronet ceased speaking, and no one answered him. There was silence in the room. The sick man lay with shut eyes, and white, drawn face; Frederica stood close by the bed, her slender figure stretched to its full height, with rigid arms and intertwined fingers, and a marble fixity of features that made her seem for the moment like a piece of exquisite sculpture. Presently, her eyes wandered from the bed to where Duplessis was leaning in an attitude of dejection, with one elbow resting on the chimney-piece. Their eyes met. In those of Duplessis there was a soft, loving, wistful look—such a look as but very few eyes can express, and rarely those of a man; and it pierced through all Frederica's armour straight to her heart. He came a step or two nearer, and resting his arms on a high-backed chair of black oak, gazed fixedly at her with that same yearning, inexplicable look in his eyes.

'I am here in a very false position this evening, Miss Spencelaugh,' he said; 'but I freely trust to your kindness to overlook the fact, and to listen to the few words I have to say, for the first time and the last, on a subject that has been very near to my heart for a long time. I have been silent hitherto, and I should have remained silent had not Sir Philip broken the ice; but as the case now stands, I must—for after what has passed I can no longer remain dumb—try to fashion into words some little of what I feel. I have loved you long and truly—loved you from the first day I saw you—and with that Duplessis told briefly, in warm,

impassioned accents, the story of his love. 'But the wild, mad dream I was foolish enough to cherish is all over now,' he ended by saying; 'and from this night, Miss Spencelaugh, I shall haunt your presence no more. In a few days, I shall leave Monksshire for ever.'

It was certainly a very finished piece of acting. He spoke in a minor key, slowly and almost solemnly, and there was a tender pathos in his voice which assisted his eyes wonderfully. Frederica felt herself strangely moved. The firm ground on which she had planted herself seemed to be slipping imperceptibly from under her feet. That voice, those eyes; surely truth and love— She felt herself sliding down towards some terrible abyss, from which only by a last desperate effort was there any chance of escape. She was roused by an exclamation from Duplessis, and her eyes followed his to the bed. A fearful change had come over the sick man. He was sitting upright in bed, his fingers clutching convulsively at the counterpane, and his eyes staring straight before him, while a cold clammy sweat bedewed his forehead. Frederica's arm was round him in an instant; his head came slowly round till his eyes met hers. There was something terrible in the intensity of their gaze. Inaudible words formed themselves on his lips. 'He is dying!' cried Frederica in a tone of anguish. 'Ring for help.'

Again his lips formed themselves to speak, and this time a faint murmur fell on Frederica's ear. She bent her head to listen. 'You will marry him, dear, will you not?' muttered the old man faintly, with that same terribly earnest look in his eyes.

Frederica's heart seemed to die within her. 'Yes—I will marry him,' she said in a low, clear voice that was strangely unlike her own. Duplessis, with his hand on the bell-rope, heard the words and turned, while a sudden gleam of triumph shot across his face; and next instant the warning summons rang through the house. An almost inaudible 'God bless you!' shaped itself on the old man's lips, and then the light suddenly left his eyes, and he fell back insensible on the pillows. Frederica's power of endurance was at an end. She turned from the bed. Duplessis saw the change in her face, and sprang to help her; but before he could reach her, she sank to the ground with a low cry, and remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER XXIV.—WHO WROTE THE LETTERS?

The country clocks were just striking midnight as Mr Duplessis walked up the pathway of his little garden, and paused for a moment before going indoors to listen to the faint musical chimes borne through the silence from some near-at-hand church; and to glance for the second time at certain moonlight effects of cunningly interwoven light and shade among the trunks and crooked branches of the gnarled old trees that skirted his little demesne; for Mr Duplessis flattered himself that he had the soul of an artist for such trifles. He had walked home from Belair through the frosty moonlight, with no company save his cigar and his own thoughts—had walked home alone and of choice, that he might be enabled, calmly and without interruption, to think over all that had happened to him on that eventful evening. He had triumphed at last; his long waiting had met with the reward he coveted most; Frederica Spence-

laugh had promised to become his wife. True, the promise had not been given by her as he would have liked it to be given; it had been dragged from her by main force, as it were; but he flattered himself that when once she were his own, she would speedily learn to be as loving and docile as any lord and master need desire. So there was triumph at his heart, and a bright smile of triumph on his handsome face, as he walked home along the lonely country roads, alternately smoking and humming scraps from Béranger.

Mr Duplessis let himself into the house by means of his latch-key, and went forward into the sitting-room, which was dimly lighted by a few embers in the grate. He was quickly followed by his housekeeper, sleepy and half-dazed, carrying a couple of lighted candles.

'You need not have sat up for me, Benson,' he said; 'I could have managed very well if you had left matches and a candle in the hall.'—Antoine was away for a brief holiday, having gone to visit a brother who had just opened a café in London, otherwise Benson would have been in bed two hours ago.

'Who brought this letter, and when did it come?' asked Mr Duplessis suddenly, as he took up a singular-looking document from the table.

'Letter, sir! What letter?' said the housekeeper. 'I never put any letter on the table, and not a soul has called here since you went out this evening.'

'Then how the deuce did the letter get here? It was certainly not on the table when I went out.'

Mrs Benson was quite unable to say how the letter had got there. She did not like to contradict her master, but she felt sure he must have put it there himself before going out, and have forgotten it.

Mr Duplessis, with the unopened letter in his hand, walked quickly across the room to the French window opposite the fireplace which gave access to the lawn. He opened it with a turn of the handle, and it could have been just as readily opened from the outside. 'This window ought certainly to be bolted at dusk,' he said rather sharply. 'As it is, thieves and vagabonds of every kind can come and go as easily as I can myself.'

Mrs Benson folded her arms meekly over her chest, but said never a word in reply: she felt the reproof to be a just one.

Mr Duplessis went back to the fire, and sinking into an easy-chair, placed his glass in his eye, and proceeded to examine the letter with a sort of half-contemptuous curiosity. The paper was coarse and dingy, and the direction was in a peculiar crabbed hand, which afforded no clue to the sex of the writer. It was folded in the old-fashioned style, without an envelope; 'And it is actually fastened with a wafer!' muttered Mr Duplessis to himself. 'Some begging-letter, I suppose, from a widow with sixteen young children; or from a poor but unfortunate tradesman, requesting the loan of a small sum to set him up in business again; to be paid back with interest at dooms-day. Bah! I'm sick of such appeals;' and with a fillip of his thumb and finger, he burst open the letter.

Benson had been fidgeting about—bolting the shutters, and placing the candles nearer her master, and raking the few dying embers together; and was just turning to leave the room, when Mr Duplessis leaped from his chair with a wild, inarticulate cry, as though he had been shot, and then stood with one hand pressed to his head, staring at

the open letter with a face as colourless as that of the marble Aphrodite on the cabinet close by.

'Are you ill, sir? Can I do anything for you?' cried the terrified housekeeper, advancing a step or two.

His lips moved in reply, but no sound came from them; but she understood from the motion of his arm that he wished to be alone; so she went out trembling, and closed the door softly behind her; but went no further than the other end of the passage, and then stood listening for whatever might happen next. In a few minutes the bell rang. She went in timidly.

Mr Duplessis was seated in his easy-chair again; the colour had in some measure come back to his face, but he looked twenty years older than he had done only a few minutes before. 'This letter brings me very bad news, Benson,' he said, speaking in a low, forced voice, and without looking his housekeeper in the face. 'It tells me that my only brother is dead.'

'Indeed, sir! I am very sorry to hear that,' said Benson in a voice of deep concern, remembering, however, at the same time, that she had never heard Mr Duplessis speak of such a relative.

'So am I, Benson—very sorry indeed. There are certain business matters connected with this sad event which render it imperatively necessary that I should start for town by the first train. You will look after the lodge till Antoine returns; and should there be any inquiries for me, you may mention the mournful circumstance which has thus suddenly called me away, and say that I shall be back by Wednesday next at the latest. I find that a mail-train passes the nearest station at two o'clock, so that I have no time to lose. You will light the candles in my dressing-room at once, and then make me a cup of strong coffee; you may as well also put me up a sandwich or two as quickly as you can.'

'Shall you want the horse got out, sir, to take you to the station?'

'No; I shall have nothing to carry but my small travelling-bag; and the walk this fine night will refresh me.'

Half an hour later, Mr Duplessis bade his housekeeper a kindly farewell, and quitted Lilac Lodge, carrying his bag in his hand, and took the road leading to the nearest railway station; while Benson, sorely troubled and perplexed in her mind, fastened up the house, and went to bed.

In the dusk of the afternoon of the day following the departure of Mr Duplessis, Mrs Benson, having given the housemaid a holiday, sat leisurely enjoying her tea, the sole inmate of Lilac Lodge, when she was startled by a loud single knock at the front-door, and on proceeding to open it, found there two plainly-dressed men—certainly not gentlemen, probably two pettifogging tradesmen who had called about a bill, she said to herself—one of whom inquired whether Mr Duplessis were at home.

'No, he ain't at home,' said the housekeeper irritably, for she was vexed at being disturbed over her first cup; 'and what's more, he won't be at home for another week. His brother is dead, and he had to set off by the mail for London last night. There!' and she would have shut the door in the faces of the men, had not a foot been quietly interposed to prevent her.

'Then, if the governor's not here,' said one of the strangers, 'you will perhaps have no objections to shew us over the house.'

'Me shew you over the house!' began Benson,

when one of the men bending forward, whispered a few words in her ear, on which she fell back with a scared face, and allowed them to enter; and having shut the door behind them, she went back to her tea in the kitchen; but her appetite was gone, and she sat listening and trembling, while the two strangers went about their perquisition up stairs and down.

'Rummy start, ain't it?' said one of the men to the other, as they came for the second time into the sitting-room, having discovered no trace of Mr Duplessis. 'I wonder whether somebody has given him the office, and he has hooked it, or whether this story about his brother being dead is true?'

'The woman says he went last night, and we heard nothing about the affair till this morning. How was he to suppose we should find it out to-day?'

'By jingo! What's this?' exclaimed the other man, whose sharp eyes had caught sight of a partially-burned paper in the grate; and next moment he was unfolding it, and smoothing it out with careful, dexterous fingers.

The paper was strong and coarse, and had been squeezed up so tightly that the flames had merely burned away the loose edges, leaving the contents nearly intact. Throwing on to the letter the concentrated light of his bull's-eye, the second man peered over his friend's shoulder, and the two read as follows:

'The dark secret which you thought you had hidden for ever, has come to light. To-morrow morning the police will be on your track. One who has been a blind instrument in the discovery of a fearful crime—one who would not willingly have your blood lie at his door—warns you. Flee while there is yet time. To-morrow it will be too late.'

Some other word had been written where the word *his* stood in the letter, and afterwards carefully erased.

'The bird has flown, and the game's up for the present,' said one of the men, when the document had been spelled carefully through.

'It was this bit of paper that started him,' said the other. 'The story about his brother is all gag. But don't it strike you as strange that the note I hold in my hand, and the one received by our superintendent this morning, are both in the same handwriting? There can't be any doubt about it; it's too remarkable a fist to be easily imitated. Rum, ain't it?—Now, you had better stop here a bit while I go up to the station, and hand in this note, and get fresh instructions; and I'll send down another man to relieve you as soon as possible.'

The case was as the two men had stated it. By the early post that morning, the Normanford superintendent of police had received an anonymous letter conveying certain information, the accuracy of which he felt himself bound at once to investigate. He put his men upon the track pointed out in the letter. Abel Garrod and his wife were the first persons questioned. They gave evidence as to the meeting of Mr Duplessis and the woman Marie; to the intimate relations apparently existing between the two; to the stay of the latter under Abel Garrod's roof for three days; and finally, to their departure together. Simultaneously with this inquiry, another was going forward at the *Silver Lion* at Fairwood; and here the police gathered another piece of confirmatory evidence not mentioned in the letter, in the production, by the landlady, of a handkerchief

marked with blood, and bearing the name of the missing woman, found under the seat of the gig the day after it had been hired by Mr Duplessis. The old collector at the toll-bar also underwent a strict examination ; and then the two parties of police met by previous appointment at Martell's Leap, the neighbourhood of which spot their anonymous informant had directed them to search minutely, especially the beach immediately below, and the crevices and recesses in the face of the cliff.

Leaving his men still occupied with the search, the superintendent himself rode over to Sir Harry Craxford, the nearest magistrate ; and on the strength of the evidence which he laid before him, obtained a warrant for the arrest of Henri Duplessis, which was at once placed in the hands of two efficient officers, but with what result, we have already seen. The search for the missing woman, unavailing on the first day, was resumed with renewed energy the following morning, but without further result than the discovery, on a ledge of rock about twenty feet above the beach, of a broken jet bracelet, which was at once identified by Jane Garrod as similar to one worn by Madame. This discovery went a long way towards confirming the general opinion, that the missing woman had been thrown over the cliff ; and as it was found to have been high-water at 4 P.M. on the day of her disappearance, there was little doubt that, in such a case, her body had been washed away by the tide.

Of Duplessis himself, no tidings could be learned, neither on the railway nor elsewhere. Country constables and metropolitan detectives alike failed in their efforts to trace him. A minute description of his personal appearance was inserted in the *Police Gazette*, and there read by thousands of keen eyes, all thenceforth eagerly on the watch, in seaport town and country village, to single out a quarry which promised so much sport to his captors ; but from the moment when the housekeeper, looking out after him into the moonlight, saw him disappear behind the screen of laurels which shut in the lawn, he seemed as utterly lost to human ken as though the earth had opened at his feet, and swallowed him up for ever. Of Antoine the imperturbable, when he returned home, which he did on the day following that of his master's departure, policedom could make nothing. The quiet insolence of his replies, when he was examined before Sir Harry Craxford, threw that worthy but irascible personage into such a violent rage as threatened at one time to bring on a fit of apoplexy ; but as it could not be shewn that the valet was in any way mixed up with the affair which attached such dark suspicion to Duplessis, the magistrate was obliged to order him to be set at liberty ; and the next night, Antoine disappeared as mysteriously as his master had done, and was seen no more at Lilac Lodge.

The mind of Mr Davis, however, the superintendent, still remained restless and ill at ease. That the two anonymous letters—the one addressed to himself, and the other addressed to Duplessis—had been written by the same person, was a fact scarcely open to dispute, when they came to be compared together. But who was the writer of them ? This was a question which the superintendent found himself utterly unable to answer. All his cautious underhand inquiries could elicit no information on the point ; and he was fain after a time to give the matter up, and class it among the other unravelled puzzles of his profession.

At Belair, the news of Mr Duplessis's sudden departure, and of the strange charge afterwards alleged against him, was received at first as something too incredible for belief. The man had been there so often, and was so intimately known, that the inmates of the Hall could hardly help feeling at first as if some shadow of disgrace attached to themselves. Lady Spencelaugh was sorry in her way, for Mr Duplessis had been one of her few favourites ; but it was a sorrow that was very short-lived, and soon gave way to indignation at the thought that 'so vile a creature,' as she now termed the Canadian, had succeeded for so long a time in imposing on so important a personage as her Ladyship. By Frederica, the news was received with strangely mingled feelings, which she herself would have been powerless to analyse. In the first shock of her surprise and disbelief, she felt more warmly towards the Canadian than she had ever done before. Had she not promised to become his wife ? and now that this horrible cloud of disgrace and misery was lowering over him, was not her proper place by his side ? Yes ; but how could she be by his side ?—how comfort him by written or spoken word, now that he was gone no one knew whither ? And when day passed after day, and still he came not to disprove the black charges brought against him ; and when Frederica read in the local newspaper the fearful list of proofs which the exertions of the police had gathered up, one after another, her conviction of his innocence began to give place to doubt ; and with this doubt came a rush of fearful joy, which she found it vain to try to stifle, at the thought, that if Duplessis were never to return, then she, Frederica Spencelaugh, would be once more a free woman. How warmly the thought nestled round her heart ! It was like a hidden singing-bird that would not be chased away, or chidden into silence, but still sang sweetly on within some inmost bower.

The news of the charge against his friend Duplessis was sedulously kept from the ears of Sir Philip Spencelaugh. In the then feeble state of his health, such a shock might have proved fatal to the old man. It was intimated to him that the Canadian had been called away on private business of importance, which was likely to detain him for some time ; and although he often wondered, in a feeble-minded way, why Duplessis neither came nor wrote, his memory was so far weakened that he often forgot the absence of his friend, and talked of him as though he were engaged to dine at Belair on the morrow.

F I N I S.

Finis—the fittest word to end
Life's book, so mystical and solemn ;
The fiat of a Roman judge ;
The last stone of the finished column.

Finis—our thrilling, parting word,
As standing by the grave we linger,
And hear the earth fall where the yew
Points downward with its sable finger.

Finis—the saddest word of all,
Irrevocable, changeless, certain ;
The parting sigh beside the dead ;
The prompter's word to drop the curtain.

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